Civil Air Patrol
Oral History Interview

WNHC 17.83-22

VERNON HICKMAN

2 AUGUST 1983

NATIONAL HISTORICAL COMMITTEE
Headquarters CAP

CIVIL AIR PATROL

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview

of

Vernon Hickman

by

Capt. Hellenmerie Walker, CAP
Capt Frank S. Myers, CAP

DATE; 2 August 1983

Location: Portland, Oregon

FOREWORD

The following is the transcript of an oral history interview recorded on magnetic tape. Since only minor emendations have been made, the reader should consistently bear in mind that he is reading a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word. Additionally, no attempt to confirm the historical accuracy of the statements has been made. As a result, the transcript reflects the interviewee's personal recollections of a situation as he remembered it at the time of the interview.

Editorial notes and additions made by CAP historians are enclosed in brackets. If feasible, first names, ranks, or titles are also provided. Any additions, deletions and changes subsequently made to the transcript by the interviewee are not indicated. Researchers may wish to listen to the actual interview tape prior to citing the transcript.

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

That I, Vesta D. Thompson, have this day participated in an oral-magnetic-taped interview with _____, covering my best recollections of events and experiences which may be of historical significance to the Civil Air Patrol.

I understand that the tape(s) and the transcribed manuscript resulting therefrom will be accessioned into the Civil Air Patrol's Historial Holdings. In the best interest of the Civil Air Patrol, I do hereby voluntarily give, transfer, convey, and assign all right, title, and interest in the memoirs and remembrances contained in the aforementioned magnetic tapes and manuscript to the Civil Air Patrol, to have and to hold the same forever, hereby relinquishing for myself, my executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns all ownership, right , title, and interest therein to the donee expressly on the condition of strict observance of the following restrictions:

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Vesta D. Thompson DONOR

Dated 3-24-85

Accepted on behalf of the Civil Air Patrol by Capt Walker

Dated _____

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

From servicing small aircraft in Charlotte, N.C. to Engineering Officer at CAP base in Charleston, S.C. may sound simple, but nothing was easy as World War II got underway. Radio problems, carburetor icing, and balky bomb racks kept Vern Hickman and his crew busy on the Base.

Life on the home front was good as soon as the family arrived and found a house on the beach next door to the Jack Moore's. After a brief tour in Texas, the Hickman's and the Moore's both made Portland their home.

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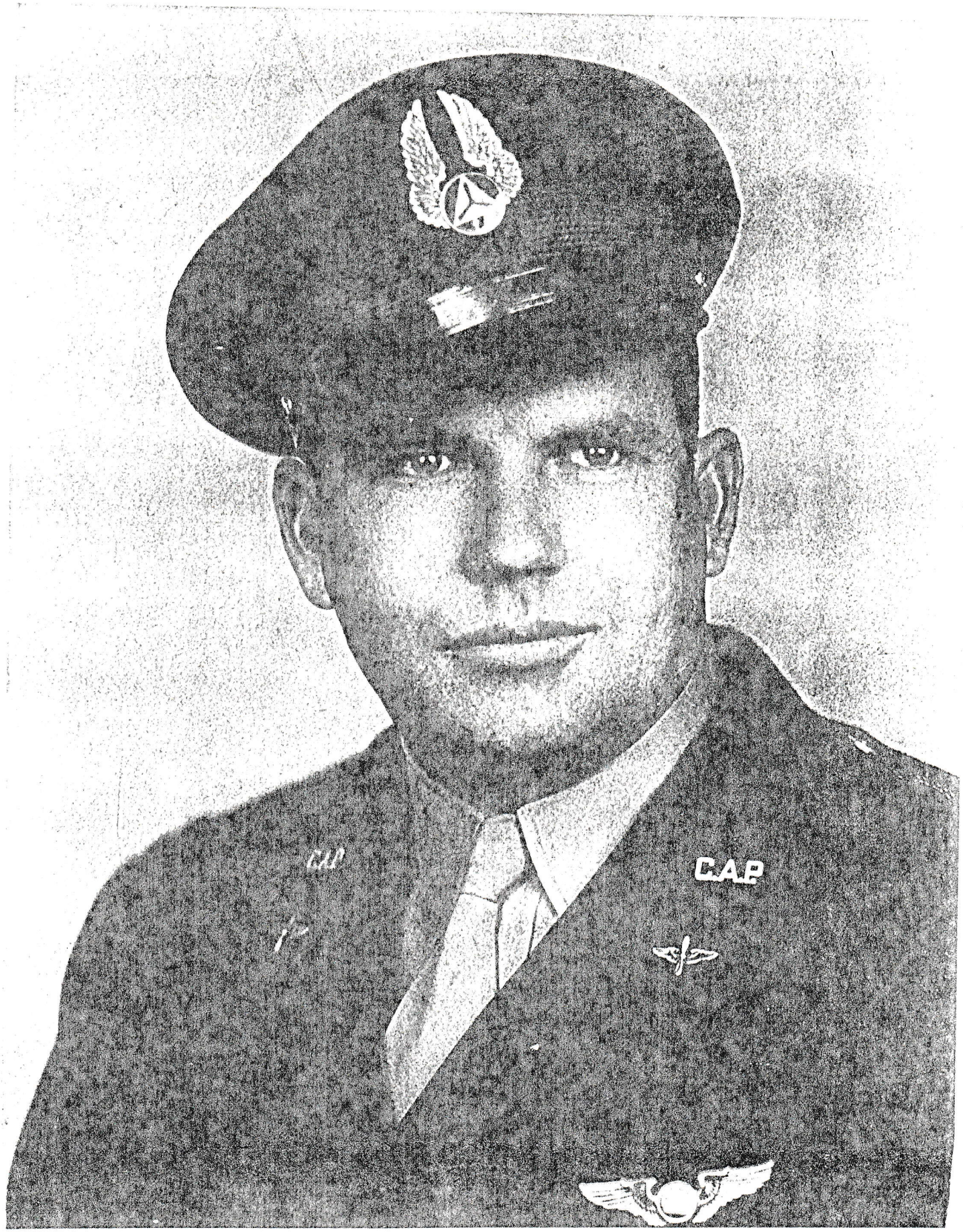
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CAP ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

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Taped Interview with: Vernon Hickman
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Conducted by: Capt. Hellenmerie Walker, CAP
Capt. Frank S. Myers, CAP

W: You're Vernon Hickman?

H: Yes.

W: What was your profession or vocation before Civil Air Patrol days?

H: I had an operation in Charlotte, North Carolina which was a fixed base operation and it had to do with general aviation, servicing airplanes. We had the full operation, maintenancae and hangar service, hangar rep, and things of that nature.

W: You had the little Piper Cubs and what were some of the types of planes?

H: You're right. In that day and time it was the Piper Cub and a full line of Piper airplanes. We also had the Stinson and the Fairchild, and others. Charlotte is the center for the textile industry. We didn't know how much of a tool the airplane would be in the business world, but I think we could see pretty early that it had quite a part to play in business travel. Of course the war came along and that changed everything, changed the future of that plan.

W: When did you first become acquainted with Civil Air Patrol?

H: It was when the bases first were set up. I only knew about it just a short time before.

W: Tell me about it. Who contacted you?

H: I was contacted by Dexter Martin, the Wing Commander for the state of South Carolina.

W: Now, I have been cautioned to keep my Carolinas straight. There is South and there is North.

H: Right. I lived in North Carolina...

W: You lived in North Carolina but you started the base in...

H: In Charleston, South Carolina, because they were just a couple of weeks ahead of the other base that was set up in North Carolina.

W: In setting up this base, what was your active duty assignment?

H: I was assigned as an engineering officer at a captain's rating.

W: Is that like operations?

H: No, this was strictly a maintenance and engineering section which actually took care of providing all the maintenance, all the service on the airplanes as they operated daily. As the time accumulated on these airplanes, certain things had to be done on each of them and it took quite a staff to do it. As it worked out, we were flying enough that we had a major overhaul every four days.

W: Did you do any flying yourself, also?

H: Only on occasions. I was not there as a pilot. I spent a lot of time just as an observer to fill in for someone. There was quite a bit of flying over the waters in spite of that.

W: But you kept them running!

H: Kept them running.

W: What kind of equipment did you have? Did you have radios?

H: The radio department, like all bases, was set up separately. That is where the name radio shack started, really. It started with CAP and the military bases, because it really was a shack, and a lot of times it would be out in the jungle or whatever. Our little radio department was set up separately and I thought at that time it looked pretty sophisticated, but it certainly wouldn't hold a candle to today's avionics.

W: Were you concerned with, or was it part of your job, to attend to the bombs? As I understand, the first bombs and the first bomb sights were rather pathetic installations.

H: It was rather crude, I will have to agree. The main thing we had to do was mount the bomb racks and the releases. We put the release controls up in the cabin so the observer would reach them, and we'd hang these demolition bombs. I've forgotten the weight of them, 110 pounds wasn't it?

Ernie Helms: The demolition usually ran 100 pounds and the

depth charges were usually 150 to 200 pounds.

H: Yes, the depth charges were quite a bit heavier. The amazing thing about it, these were hanging on little 90 horsepower Stinsons, on up to Fairchilds, which would be about 145 horsepower, and then up to 300 or 400 horsepower on some of the Waco or Staggerwing Beech.

W: I've heard a term used by the Germans, they called some planes grasshoppers. Which one of the planes were those, or was that just a collective term for the Civil Air Patrol planes?

H: I'm sure it was just a general statement. The mere fact of the comparison to some of the military airplanes means it would be a very light airplane.

W: When you were speaking a while ago of the work of keeping the planes going, you mentioned carburetor ice. Can you tell me more about that?

H: Carburetor ice is something that was a real problem. It was back in the days when very little was known about carburetor ice and it was a matter of sort of staying ahead of the problem. We found by putting in a manifold pressure gauge, we could identify carburetor ice more quickly than by any other device.

Often we'd use a carburetor temperature gauge. This really didn't tell you the whole story. Whenever you began to ice up, if you had a manifold pressure gauge in, you could see about an inch drop in manifold pressure. This would alert you to pull on some carburetor heat and thaw it out. If you got too far behind it, you could be in trouble.

FM: Have you ever modified the carburetor air heating systems of those planes to get more heat into them, from the factory?

H: Yes, that was also done on some of these planes that had cooler carburetor induction systems on them.

W: All of this time you not only were keeping the planes ready to fly, you were inventing and instigating safety factors for them.

H: Of course, safety was our number one concern. We created anything that would make the flying safer. You start adding up all the hours that were flown over that water, and it's just an amazing record set by all the bases. It was done with a limited supply of parts and things like that and many times we had to improvise. When we did that, you'd have to make darn sure you got it right! I know if we had not had some pretty good men on these bases we would have been shut down waiting for pieces to arrive. There was no time to wait.

W: Were you involved with any accidents on the base?

H: We lost one airplane at sea, which we believe was the result of carburetor ice. Had they landed just a mile or two further out, they would have been in the Gulf stream. They were in a little bit close on this particular deal and that water was awfully cold, so they only lasted about 45 minutes.

FM: Did you have anybody who made the beach on an emergency landing?

H: Oh, sure, we had several - everybody's had that. I waited for one with a broken crank shaft coming in. He landed with a broken crank shaft. We talked with him on the radio and told him to just barely keep the nose up a little bit, put on a lot of pressure power, and just land on the beach. We met him on the beach with a crew and we had him off the beach in about an hour and a half with no wrench or anything.

FM: There's a story for you!

W: Any more unusual events, or was every day unusual?

H: Our bases were along the coast. Everyone at first thought we were under the Army Air Corps, which we were not. Actually, all of our instructions and everything came from Naval Intelligence on that coast - the Eastern Sea Frontier. We had the uniform of the Army Air Corps at the time, although we were actually operating under Naval Intelligence.

W: That was something.

H: Being a part of the staff, I was able to sit in on a lot of these breifing meetings. They knew certain subs and the sub commander's tactics. They knew where he was going to go and the whole history of it before he left the base in Germany.

W: And sent you fellows out to hunt him up.

H: We were wired in on all this information, but whether or not it could ever come down to any particular sighting, we were aware of what was happening. These were very, very tense times for us. I think we were under a lot of tension, but we were younger and it didn't seem to bother us.

Up at Charleston, like Ernie mentioned, there was loss in shipping. Three days before our Base was officially opened the U-boats waited. They caught a freighter coming out of the jetty at Charleston harbor and sank it, just as it pulled out of the harbor, right there! That's how close they were. They were really bold.

W: What were the living conditions like there at the base, your housing?

H: Our Base was set up on James Island, southeast of downtown Charleston. It was an old landing field, that's all it was. We set up barracks and equipped them with bunks and made them as comfortable as we could. We had a good mess hall and it was actually, I'd say, just about the same as you would find at any military post.

W: What did you do for recreation there at the base?

H: There were lots of things to do. One of the places that Charleston had downtown was, I understand, one of six Michelob beer dealers in the whole country. They actually had draft Michelob. I guess in those days it was just an unusual beer. That was one of the places that we fellows would hit, because for 15c you could get a great big bowl of shrimp. You would have to sit and peel them and dip them in some sea food dunk, and that with some Michelob beer was quite a deal. If I remember, the beer was about 15c also. That was a very popular spot in downtown Charleston, but there were many things. We would go over to the beach. This Base was just a sort distance from the ocean.

When Jack Moore arrived at the base, he found a place to live over on Folly Beach. For three or four weeks I was trying to find a place to move my family from Charlotte down there. It so happened that a place right next to his on Folly Beach became available so I rushed over and was able to rent it. I brought the family down and the Moores and we became great friends. My wife came down with her sister, and Dorothy Moore's sister from Seattle was visiting then. They had a bridge foursome going all the time. Jack was very, very interested in my operation in the Engineering Section. We talked about moving that operation to Portland, Oregon. We talked about this thing for over perhaps a couple of cases of Scotch. As it all worked out, this is exactly what happened. That was the foundation of getting to know Jack real well. Our families became very close friends.

W: Let me go back here just a minute. As I understand, the pilots were paid a per diem. Were you also?

H: Yes, we were all paid a per diem.

W: How much did you, quote, make?

H: Well, as I remember, it was eight dollars a day.

W: You had no income coming from your place of business?

H: No.

W: So, this is what you lived on? You literally closed your

business down...

H: I sold out for my equity in the business. Sold to the C. Foley Compay of New York, who took it over after I moved from the facility.

W: When you finished there at the South Carolina base, where did you go then?

H: They assigned us to El Paso, Texas and from there they decided to organize a base at Marfa, Texas. That's where I finished CAP duties.

W: Was the one at El Paso a Liaison or a Coastal Patrol base?

H: No, that was part of the Border Patrol that started in Laredo.

W: And Marfa?

H: Marfa was the same. It was the central base. It wasn't half way between, but it was felt that it should be set up so it could be convenient for both ends of the run to stop for service of the planes.

W: And you did the same type of work. You kept the planes going.

H: Yes. The fact of the matter is that the Charleston Engineering Section was moved to Marfa, the whole thing.

W: And what has been your involvement with the CAP since those days?

H: I have not been involved since those days.

W: Did you move from the Marfa base to Portland and started to work with Jack Moore?

H: Yes, Ernie Helms and I were in the same BOQ in Marfa, after Jack had returned to Portland. After we finished the Border Patrol and closing the base, Jack wanted me to move up this way. I told him about Ernie, that he was someone that could take that flight department over and make it go well. He told me to bring him aong. He asked that the equipment and everything we had at Marfa be shipped to Portland.

Ernie Helms: I never did get back. They gave me an airplane to Wasington, D.C. and my wife met me there and we took off.

H: My wife picked me up in Atlanta. We came back through Marfa and drove on out to Portland. We've been here ever since. The equipment from Marfa had been shipped out here in a box car - loaded, too.

Ernie Helms: That was the beginning of Western Skyways.

FM: Was that located at Troutdale at that time?

Ernie Helms: Yes, we operated at Troutdale.

H: There was no operation at Troutdale when Ernie and I first saw Troutdale!

Ernie Helms: It was just a field, like it was before the war.

FM: Who owned it?

H: Port of Portland.

W: Mr. Hickman, do you have any suggestions for people or events that you think should be included in our history of Civil Air Patrol?

H: Well, if I can't give them to you now, I'll give it some thought and get back to you on it.

W: I really would appreciate it. Thank you Mr. Hickman.